



## **Beverly Hanscom Chases the Devil by ninety6tears**

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**Summary:** Something is on the tip of the tongue as they look at each other, something they have tried to say a hundred times before; but then light pours into their heads and the question, the memory, the dream is gone. Ben/Beverly

## Beverly Hanscom Chases the Devil

She puts her book down on her chest when he comes into the bedroom a few minutes past eleven. "Is Santa coming round yet?" she asks, yawning.

Ben scoffs. "That would be a record. He's probably wide awake still. If you want to catch some rest, I'll take care of it."

"I'm not too tired," Beverly says, smiling softly. "Why are you still dressed?" she adds, squinting at his slacks and dress shirt he's been wearing since they came home from dinner.

"Sat down to work for a while and didn't even think of it." He shrugs, beginning to loosen his tie.

Beverly looks away in thought for a moment. "Do you think Jess would like to come over for dinner this week? I feel awful for his mother, having to try to put together a Christmas on top of everything else going on in that family..."

"I'd never have thought of it, but it's a good idea." He leans over and pecks her on the mouth.

She says something else in a hum of thinking aloud, then goes quiet. His leather belt makes a soft zip of noise as he pulls it from the loops, his hands slowing at it when he gets caught by idle thoughts. When he looks at her he notices the way her eyes are following the belt, enjoying something to do with his hips.

"What?" he mutters, a rhetorical bit of teasing. She only smiles before getting up to slip past him into the bathroom.

When she comes back, her forearm slides right into his grip and he pulls her, backs her playfully into the dresser. Lifts her on top of it and sloppily binds her arms together behind her with the belt while she grins against his jaw. He parts her legs around him and loves her. They rise and fall with his hand over her groaning and laughing mouth, come out of it with surprised expressions of maybe wanting to remark that they hadn't done *that* in a while. After several

lingering strokes of kisses he finally says, "Alright, let's go check if Eddie's asleep."

They wake from brief but deep sleep in the morning, looking at each other almost the instant some knock of motion jostles them both out of dreams. Something is on the tip of the tongue as they look at each other, something they have tried to say a hundred times before; but then light pours into their heads and the question, the memory, the dream is gone.

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She remembers that around the time right after they got married, and maybe a bit before, they were both plagued with nightmares. An odd thing, because it was so simultaneous. Odder still because even when that awful feeling of being something lodged inside of a monster's throat passed into conscious safety, even when they seemed able to look at each other and perfectly understand the dull horror that was reflected between them, neither of them could say what the fear was. Ben would lurch up with a helpless sound and make a few steps into the bathroom like he thought he was going to vomit, and she would sit up to let the feeling abate, holding out her hand for him when he returned to get back under the covers after patting some water over his face. She would ask, "What was it?" But after a while she knew to expect the same answer every time, because it was always the same answer with her. *I don't remember.*

Sometimes nightmares, sometimes just strangeness. Something like drowning in dishwater, or just a wet scrape of darkness until some faceless friend touches her or lights a match. Sometimes she woke up feeling an urgent sort of womanly and reached to wake him with a caress.

This lasts even now, that sense of something crisp and vivid but just out of reach as soon as her eyes open. Too removed from what it feels like to simply not remember a dream. What this is feels more real than the life she was living with her first husband, more tied-together at the ends and looping back around to meet her again. There is something dark there, something terrible, but something good too.

Ben awakes in a mild flinch. Her eyes flicker open and meet his. The

impasse is as usual, the false sense that something might actually be said this time.

Neither of them ever does get to putting it into words. He looks idly into her eyes for a moment, then gives her a kiss before shrugging up out of bed.

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It was hard not to take a few looks around for a familiar face on her way into the Jade of the Orient. She wasn't feeling nervous exactly, about the reunion in itself, but there was an open pit of uncertainty inside her she knew would be filled with something heavier soon enough. When she heard someone shyly call out, "Beverly?" she turned to squint at the man who'd been fumbling a pair of sunglasses off his face as she passed right by.

As she stepped closer she was sure that this must be someone with a message for her; at first glance he seemed too young to be anyone she was waiting for. But he was hooking the sunglasses over the top button of his shirt and catching her eyes in his and repeating her name incredulously: "Bev Marsh?"

"Oh," she said, the name turning from a question to a statement before it was out of her mouth: "*Ben*."

He had already realized too that she was unmistakable, and was smiling, taking her over from foot to hairs like she was a clean drink of water to whatever scraped-up mood made his eyes look hungover and red-rimmed; of course she understood where that had come from.

"God, you've slimmed down," she couldn't help saying.

"A little," he said, and she placed his old kindness as this new sort of shy unflappability, the wry modesty, his hand reaching up to pinch out something—a feather from the hotel pillow?—from a lock of her waves. He'd no sooner blinked at his reached hand with some second guess at the instant familiarity of his own motion than she'd stepped forward to hug him around the shoulders.

The embrace was tight, a thing of seeping in the comfort of the moment with no room to be self-conscious. He whispered into her hair that it was good to see her, and then he pulled away.

They loosened a little out of each other's orbits as the group came back together: Eddie joining into their strange fearful smiles when they found him inside, Richie pausing with a stunned look at their table and then blankly remarking, "Well, it looks like most of us survived disco" to break up the tension just like old times. Finally when Bill came stepping back into her life and began after a short time to really notice her, she noticed him back, but also was reminded of this something else that had only flickered at the edge of her mind earlier, something so crucial and simple she was afraid to remember, afraid to care so much for all of them again because of what could happen to any of them now.

Ben was the one who observed it first, later that night, that they all still did love each other. It was because she was so scared and so tired that she took comfort with Bill that night and because of him that she remembered what it could be to give herself away, soft and willing and bold, almost unsure of whether she had ever really done that before.

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But after, as the rest pulled off on the paths to their separate rooms, Bill now the quietest of them, she came up close to Ben's shoulder and muttered, "Want to come up to mine for a while?"

Once he followed her in, blinking around and seeming unsure of what type of invitation he'd just accepted, she offered him use of the shower and he said, "You go ahead." She took a good amount of time to wash off, letting water run into a clear pool in her hands first as she half-expected it to flow murky and poisonous. She lay on her back on the bed later while the sounds of him rinsing off after her made a calming wash over the air, only noticing the blinking light on the answering machine after the sound of the water had stopped. Blinking, she reached over and hit the button.

Kay's message was not short but it was quickly to the point; her voice was shaken and angry, and what she had to say made Bev sit up

slowly, saying, "Oh my *God*," to no one, somehow only remembering a few seconds after the warning had ended to the tone of a mechanical "No more messages" that she wasn't alone in the room. Ben was coming around the end of the bed. Her hand dropped in a fist to her lap and she looked at him almost in challenge.

"He beat up my girlfriend," she said.

"What a fucked up mess," he said, shaking his head in bewildered anger. "At least she sounds okay."

"That's my fault. I should have known he might go after her—I wasn't thinking about him at all—"

"It's not your fault, Bev." His hand on her shoulder, the movement simple and warm, and somehow she was able to believe him; she pulled on the sleeve of his shirt which he hadn't buttoned up and he sat down next to her. They looked at each other, both clean and wet and exhausted, like both were waiting for the other to propose the meaning of them sitting in here together. But the moment got away, and he shook his head. "It's not your fault and the fucker's gone now anyhow. Listen, if you want...When we all get the hell out of Dodge, you're welcome to come back to my place for a while, just to be away from it all. Hell, we could fly your friend over there too. Hemingford's no Chicago, but it's got some good places to eat, and I wouldn't mind showing you—"

"Okay." She nodded. "...Yeah. Thanks, Ben, I'd really like that."

When she noticed his eyes straying halfway to his boots, she moved over on the bed, patting the place next to her. "Come on."

Somehow not as flustered or surprised by this as he'd even been by the initial invitation, he lay down next to her in a natural slip of motion. She turned, tucking her back into him, and he put his arm around her. After some moments, when her hair had begun to dry, he started running his hand over her back in such light motions it was almost a question.

"Feels good," she murmured drowsily. Some moment after that she fell asleep.

When she woke up she was turned into him, and he seemed to have been in the stage of drifting in and out of waking. It was sundown. They shared some motionless rise into awareness of each other, and when he spoke, it felt like they'd already been talking for an hour.

"Do you love Bill?" He shook his head as if it had come out wrong. "Of course you love Bill. I just mean...after what happened with his wife, I wondered if you'd be feeling...I don't know. Like you need an ear."

She felt utterly horrible about all that, and at the same time maybe not horrible enough. "I was with him last night."

He gave a rueful, sort of embarrassed smile. "Yes. I know."

"I can't say I completely regret it. And that's awful of me, not just because of her. It's also because of you, which is even more..." She suddenly felt she was on the verge of a slight panic, or close to tears. "I only hope it doesn't spoil anything."

"Spoil..." Ben's look had furrowed into confusion. "What?"

"Ben...when we all first got back together, I felt...*sad* for all the forgetting. For all that we'd missed out on with each other, for the fact that we could only pick up again in these paraphrases of where we'd been all these past years. For the fact that I couldn't even tell the truth, because I didn't want to talk about who Tom really was. It was all a wistful feeling, but with you...I actually felt like I'd been robbed. Not just that I would have loved to have been there the first time you got something built, that I would have loved to take you out for a drink about it. But I felt like I *should* have been there, as much as a father should be there for his kid's graduation or something like that."

Ben's somber response proved that he had missed the mark somewhat: "I had a hunch about Tom from the get-go and I didn't exactly feel wistful about not being around through that."

"God," she broke off. "Do you have any idea what I'm trying to say? With Bill, sure, I would have liked to be able to hear about his novels and his movies and his wife when those things first came around, but it wasn't...it wasn't such an ache."



"His life wouldn't have been the same if you were there, though," Ben said carefully. "Some of the things we missed, they wouldn't have happened at all."

"Maybe that's what I mean. Bill's been...fine, without me," she stammered in a tired croak. "Most of us have been fine. But me, I don't remember the last time I was fine, and it could have been good, really good, if I'd had somebody better...I think I wanted Bill last night because I knew I very well could have been about to die, and I loved him, but I also knew that I wasn't going to spend whatever we did thinking, 'If only we could have had this all this time.' It had to be him because I knew it wouldn't hurt so much for it to only be the one time, you understand?"

Ben's eyes were wrought with something that might have been reluctant hope. He swallowed. "Okay."

She made a note of wilted laughter. "And here I am saying this and you've maybe got a fair share of nice girlfriends back home for all I know. You're not exactly—"

"I'm not really sure what it is you're asking me for," he interrupted, "but I'm pretty sure you can have it."

Her smile was slow. "Kiss me, Ben."

His look bent downward, nervous. "Ah, shit."

"Please."

He cribbed her shoulders up under one arm and he did kiss her, carefully but deftly, with committal purpose. She ran her hand up in his hair and brought him closer. She was still tired and she didn't want him to make love to her just yet—she wanted something slow, for once—but she wanted to hunger for him for that long moment, sighing against his mouth as his hand went up through her waves and along her neck again and again.

The first night they were on the road, she lied to the hotel clerk about them being newlyweds, and later hooked her finger through his belt loop on the elevator as they stood silently next to a loudly chatting

family. The family got off on the sixth floor, leaving them alone, and she pulled him into her and pushed her hand along his fly, down and up and down again, drawing out his long whisper of her name.

It was like somebody's improbable daydream and she wasn't sure which one of them was having it. Ben had her lifted up with her legs straddled around him before the door of their room had closed behind them, and their mouths met as something painted in a bright line between a first time and a last.

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What felt like some official first act as Tom Rogan's widow was to have Ben take her, on the bed where she'd been taken by Tom many times, with her hands tied up in the belt with which he had whipped her, many times.

It took some persuasion. Ben's knowledge of all that Tom had made her do over the years was still new enough to take color out of him. Back in one of the hotel rooms, he hadn't exactly taken in any of the details in the quietly troubled stride with which Bill had accepted the general fact. When she'd made it clear that Tom had probably been coming all the way to Derry in order to kill her, considering all the facts, he got so shaky she had almost felt the anger was somehow directed at her. There was a ghost of that look when she'd begun to tease him into the possibility of the belt, and it only worsened into a fervent refusal when he realized the strap had been one of Tom's favorite props.

Her legs were wrapped around him on his lap as she stroked his face between her hands. More tentative now, she whispered, "It's because I trust you so much that I want you to, you understand?"

But he pushed her back to look straight into her eyes, interrupting her persuasion with "Does it always have to be about control?"

There was a pause; he'd lightly pulled her chin to look her in the eyes but now she slowly backed off of him, some painful feeling crushing in her chest.

She had asked herself that so many times, asked herself if it was,

after all, the fucking that had made her stay with Tom. If she was the lowest weakest whore for that fact, for bowing and begging for that dent on her just as pathetically as she'd always apologized to her father's fist. But it was that thin edge between power and control, she thought, that had intrigued her lust for almost as long as she could remember. She thought it could be a warm thing, a good thing, if someone was worth the giving of it, someone who would accept it with awe instead of taking it with theft.

And already she had started to cry, those reflexive shameful tears. Ben noticed them before she even did, coming forward with something deeply contrite sweeping through him as he pressed his lips below her eyes, already seeming to understand: He pushed her softly onto her back, arching over her, and when after a long while she felt him running and wrapping the belt to tie her arms above her, it felt as much like a consolation as him kissing away her crying. Her hands bound, he wrapped the end around two bars of the headboard and she heard the whispering little crunch of chipping leather as he knotted it. She moaned his name, asked for him. He felt her over her clothes, then slowly moved his teasing touches under her dress. Her body was ringing all over, singing up to him. Her legs reached around him in pleading and when he took off his shirt, unzipped his pants, she ebbed under him and groaned with emphasis, "I love you."

He kissed her for a deeply lingering moment and when he came up from it he was all reckless stammers. "I would never hurt you, ever, Bev...Please, can I just be in your life, come back to Nebraska with me, we'll figure it out..."

"Whatever you want," she said, her voice tilted high. "I want you, Ben..."

The tide of him entering her rocked her head back between her arms, and he gasped a hot note against the sweep of her neck. By only the third or fourth thrust she was straining deliciously against the knot of her cuffed wrists, feeling her heat spin higher with every staying of her ecstasy, every reminder that she was under him, held by him like only a feather in a hand, but drawing him helpless, pulling him down; an inconstant and circular gravity. Held, held, holding. He was only as gentle as she wanted, and when she came, the tight tautness of her was a line from her hips to the wood that creaked forward,

that snap of the constraint inspiring another wave of flight that lasted in a long shouting twist. He shifted her body farther up to curl her around him snugly and when his groans were shorter and his shoulders trembling atop hers she was begging for that end inside her, wanting his as much as she'd wanted hers.

Like an abrupt slap of cold he was unexpectedly pulling out of her, but not for long: He untied her. She set her arms around his shoulders, her legs higher around him, and he was back inside, again, again, and finally shuddering apart.

He held to her for a moment. She waited for the parting, for something far too apologetic. But when she touched her fingers along his brows and he noticed the slightly reddened rings on her wrists, he kissed the insides of them, and only said in a definite mutter, "I love you, Bev."

The detritus of her dresser was still a shattered mess around them on the floor. The sight of it had come almost equally as a surprise to both of them when they'd arrived there. It had taken her a moment to remember the fight, and of why it had happened.

The fact that she'd had to get back to those old friends in Derry was still tangible but even then it was difficult to lay her finger on how it had been that brutally important, as vital as the death threat she had laid on her husband in her struggle to get out of his house. The story they'd given the police was that she had been once and for all leaving her husband, that before Tom had apparently been missing she'd fled to her hometown and then reconnected with some old schoolmates there. Reconnected, fixed, with Ben. That was all true, but it felt like some scaled-down version of a truth. She had a tingle of awareness that something that shouldn't have been possible was at play here, but there was a part of her mind that was completely willing to accept that. It had seemed the same to Ben when they'd talked about it; the important structure of it, to him, was that they remembered that there was something they forgot.

The dull echoes of Tom Rogan still plodded around, clumsy and unimportant in her mind. She found her hands joining to press a thumb along her palm, feeling for a scar from a broken soda bottle that was no longer there. She wondered, if there was some force that

could make that corner of her mind that shivered with horror go black and amnesiac, why it couldn't do her a favor and erase the whips and slaps and all the clouded years of humiliation. But as she fell asleep in Ben's arms it was a certain thing that even if she would remember Tom, remember her father, they could not remember her. Those memories were true and real but utterly without value; they did not hold her, and she did not have to hold them if she did not want to.

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The argument was the worst one they ever had. Later she would think it was some voice in the back of her mind telling her that it was dangerous to walk too far out the door that gave it the fuel to rise to that point, that they had been fighting about some unnamed fear in the room that made whatever stupid thing it had started with take on much more jagged and harsh edges. Some helpful instinct, when it only made things worse.

She supposed they were both considered to be very nice people; from the outside, there was an ease in generosity towards each other and other people and probably it was assumed that these were the qualities they valued in each other. And yes: she often softly exclaimed, "Oh, you're such a darling," when he did a favor here and there, and Ben would say he'd always been surprised by her compassion, but something to the effect that the kaleidoscope of what he loved about her could hardly be simplified to one trait at a time. He assumed her feelings weren't so old, not as complicated, but she would tell him she felt the same.

Anyhow it must have been that sweetness that made for the perception that they were a couple that probably never fought, which was far from the truth. It would take years for both of them to fully believe the other was there to stay, and until then the smallest hurts and defenses had ways of being buried and then resurfacing, sometimes in not so small ways.

There was nothing remarkable about the argument that made Beverly decide to get on a plane and be away, just for a while, except for the fact that that was what it did, and a while became longer than she could have possibly planned.

"Let's hear about it," Kay said, and when she realized Bev didn't get it she sighed. "You and Ben, honey. What happened?"

A croak came from her throat, her voice giving out in the middle of a word. She stared at the glass she'd been drinking out of, dumbfounded.

She had opened her mouth to ask, *Who?*

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She didn't know how she knew there was a house being built in that exact place, or how she knew the hands that had drawn up the floor plan, only that those hands had traced and touched her too and she wanted them back.

The wooden skeleton of a broad atrium silently accepted the clocking of her high heels, unable to echo, but the scent of fresh wood gave her some kind of assurance that it was not too ghostly. She trailed her hand along the banister at the top of the short staircase. She'd always liked the idea of living in a tri-level, liked the idea more and more the longer she lived in Tom's narrow vise of a place. Some elevation, please, but not too many stairs for when your knees got older.

The longer she lingered there the more her mind felt like one too many latched doors. She wrote down the exact address and stuck the note into her purse this time, because she could remember it, unlike the name of her invisible architect or the reason any of this was possible.

There were other conversations with Kay, in which Beverly let her come up with her own conclusions for why she wouldn't talk about this man in anything more than vague terms. Kay could take a few head-wreckers but there was no telling how she might accept that the problem was that Bev literally could not remember.

"Ben?..." Beverly repeated, snatching for the name in a dull fumble of thoughts, after Kay said it off-handedly.

"Nevermind. I don't suppose you've talked to him yet?"

Suddenly Beverly was so upset that tears sprang to her eyes. "I don't know where he is, Kay."

"He's not in home in Nebraska?" Kay asked.

Beverly went right into her purse to write the city right down next to that address that hadn't been in Virginia but in Nebraska, confused, trying to prod the exact town out of Kay. But Kay didn't seem to know that either, or even Ben's last name, and anyway, the address—or had it been a phone number?—had disappeared from her purse, or simply faded off the paper.

"Bev," Kay said, clutching at Beverly's arm after she'd been through every single corner of her bag and then begun to fight actual sobs. "Honey, it's okay..."

"Was he a good thing?" Beverly asked, shaking a little as she wiped at her tears. "Was he good to me?"

Kay's look softened, understanding this in a way that might have accidentally been an important truth. After a moment she nodded. "Yes...To tell you the truth, I didn't expect to like him. But he loves you madly, Bev."

Beverly wrung at her hands, her right fingers pinching along her left ones, stopping in an impossible union of alarm and expectation that there was an engagement ring there.

The funny thing was that Kay *thought* she was changing the subject, in her effort to calm her, when she asked, "Have you been sleeping any better?"

"...What?" Bev blinked.

"The last time, or maybe the time before last that we talked, you said you were getting all these crazy dreams. Any better now?"

"Yes," Beverly said, with a sober conviction, because the truth was she had been sleeping a flatlined, serene and dreamless sleep lately, and she could barely remember what Kay was talking about. Except when she'd gotten on that plane to Nebraska, the stewardess had woken her from a nightmare. When she'd been looking for Ben,

remembering something about Ben.

Slowly—though also just quickly enough—she began to make sense of that feeling. That whatever brief wonder she was trying to reclaim belonged intrinsically to something too horrifying for words. And oh, how unfair that was. How obscenely unfair, that Beverly could not have anything but an apartment that still smelled of Tom Rogan and his booze and his sweat and even seemingly his death, which she knew nothing about. Whatever little honeymoon she'd had with this sweet and faceless friend was buried far, far under rubble that would slice her on the way down to meet him, but she wanted him, needed him back.

"Derry," she said aloud. "I need to go back to Derry."

"Again?" Kay stammered, taken back by the small force of Beverly's resolve.

"I'm sure," she said. "Come with me to my apartment to help me pack, and make sure I don't change my mind."

It helped to try to make solid images stick, no matter how senseless they were. She trained her mind on the destination of her hometown until the sulphur-yellow tinge it seemed to carry in her mind began to stain over anything else. Her mind tapped in a metronome of the few things she needed to grab at home and in what order and how she would get to the airport, never flinching from what was forward. She envisioned the entire thing playing out like some absurdly inverted version of Orpheus descending into hell for his love, that if she snatched him or the memory of him she would have to somehow make it out again with her back to the rest of the world, never taking her eyes off of hell. The nightmares would return, but with him in one hand and the devil in the other.

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She was an hour away from Derry when she realized she'd forgotten why she was there.

She turned back, dazed, finding nothing, remembering nothing.



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"I think we knew each other when we were kids," he says, slowly and carefully, one morning.

When she goes still, her immediate wide-eyed look is too much of a dart hitting the center of something to be total confusion, so his look of nervous resolve eases into a laugh.

"Oh, thank God," he says. "You're not going to think I'm totally crazy."

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Half of a lonely year passed before she found the key at the bottom of the drawer where she kept her phonebook. She might have assumed it belonged to some storage garage Tom no longer held any claim to, might have been fooled by how mundane an object it was, but when it held cool as a kiss to her hand and shimmered just a certain way under the lazy rocking of the chandelier she'd just bumped on the way in, some memory locked right into her. Someone had given her this. Someone very important.

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When she went back to the house, it was finished.

She had no room left in her life, she felt, for idling in confused shock. She went up the stone steps to the porch and felt the key's weight in her hand. Her sigh was a defeated one as she prepared for some vague but lashing pain of disappointment, unable to even know what she was hoping she might find. She tried the key in the door.

It turned.

She went inside.

The house was a simple dream. No ostentatious finery, just an open-wide woodland feel and smell, and neither too rustic or too modern. Even when the layout wasn't traditional it had a flow as intuitive as winding farther inside of a nautilus shell. She took it in with the briefest glances, stepping almost silently from room to room, still afraid to even try to remember what she was waiting or looking for.

There was a stranger in the kitchen. She backed up hard, nearly letting out a startled scream.

He set the phone back down in the bed, turning to her with eyes that were alert but then as familiar and as gentle as home should ever be.

When she recognized him she began to tremble strangely. "Ben."

"—*Beverly*?"

She stood there, her whole life sharpened to some astonished point as the two of them looked each other over in undefinable surprise. She opened her mouth to say, "God, you've slimmed down," before realizing that that would make absolutely no sense. The disorientation raked against her, forcing frustrated tears to her eyes. "You built this?" she demanded, her tone almost angry.

Ben's voice was unsteady. "What—?"

"Did you build this house?" she asked. "Did you build this house for me?"

"How did you get in?" he returned with belated astonishment. "How are you—?"

"I have the key. You gave me a key, we bought the keys and the lockset before the place was even built because—" she gasped in mid-sentence as if the knowledge was rudely grabbing her, "maybe we knew all along that we might need to—"

"I gave you the key," he interrupted, something warmer flickering into him but with his own fearful confusion rising higher, "I gave it to you when I proposed, because I thought—if we had a house and it was connected to something that important—"

"Important," she repeated in an almost bitter mumble. The heels of her hands were wiping tears away. "I haven't seen you in almost a year, Ben. We were supposed to get *married*. And something else happened before all that, something horrible...And I don't know what I'm seeing in your eyes right now, I mean, Jesus, do you even remember what you're saying, or are we just something you wrote down somewhere?"

"This is *crazy*," Ben said, coming forward, his eyes fervent. "I *love* you. I built you this house, I *kept* building you this house even when I didn't know—"

"I was looking for you," she said thickly. "I was trying to find you. But I couldn't remember..."

"I think you're right," he said, suddenly swerving the point back to, "I think something horrible happened. But what's the rest?"

"The rest...it'll have to come back to us. It will if it needs to. Just come over here and make me remember."

So they made fierce love, and they went to bed at night as if they'd slept there together a hundred times before.

She awoke in the heaviness of the night, frantic and sweating, sitting up in a shock of mindless fugue as if to pace up out of the room. But his hand came up to soothe her; she fell back into the bed of his arms and settled slowly down again to his drowsy whispers: "Stay with me. It's alright, it's only a dream. Stay with me."

So she stayed.

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"We had a bit of a break-up, that's all," Ben says. "Of course I remember. I just don't like to think about it; that's why I don't remember much of why it happened or..."

"Or it was so strange to realize we'd forgotten all about each other that we went ahead and forgot that too," Beverly says. Eddie is sleeping next to her on the couch, his chest rising and falling softly. Somehow the canned laughter of the sitcom on TV only adds to the sheer insanity of this conversation. "You're the one who brought this whole thing up, Ben. Don't you remember the nightmares? We both had them. We could never remember what they were about, but..."

"The nightmares calmed down over time, though. I still get them...I think you had one the other night, but it's not nearly so bad now...And it's not like they ever could have been about the same thing," he says dismissively, but even while his reasoning is trying to

win out, his next tentative thought contradicts all of it. Suddenly he asks, "You don't think it's because we had Eddie, do you?"

She nods. "Yeah, I do. I think that changed something. The past was farther away somehow. And that's the other thing I was asking myself: What was the longest we've ever been apart since then? Why didn't we forget each other all over again? It would have been those couple months you were in Shanghai."

"I wanted you to come with me, but you just wanted to work on a new line, and you were..." He laughs a little. "Yeah. Five months along with Eddie when I left. And I sure as hell didn't forget you, I missed you like crazy."

They sit in silence, trying to comprehend how lucky they are, because she has to be right; it has to be true. They almost lost each other.

"Why?" is all Ben can ask, the questions feeling far too small for all of this. "How could we just *forget*?"

"Because we were supposed to, Ben. You and I were never supposed to do all of this." She shakes her head, overwhelmed. "It was moving on. We went through something *unspeakable* together, I know that and I know you feel it too. Forgetting whatever we all had with each other—and ah, God, I can't even remember all their names, can you?...It was the only way we could have any hope of just being kids again. After all, that's what kids do. They grow up and they forget."

His expression has clouded over with something, some interruption he wishes he could make, but he seems to know she isn't finished.

"And even after finding each other a second time, it wasn't any easier to have to remember."

"But you and I..."

"Of *course* it was different with us," she says, fervently assuring. "Even without this...*thing*, this horror that we defeated somehow, I've had plenty of ugliness in my life that no magic is gonna come along and make me completely forget. So I didn't listen to what I knew was true, that I was supposed to give you up. Even when I didn't think

there would be any way to make the nightmares go away if you were there, I didn't care."

His hand is around hers, squeezing it tightly. After a long moment he says, "I think it was right that two of us left together. Stayed together. Maybe we can't remember that much, but it's because we have each other that we're even talking about it now."

"...We can remember that there's something we forgot," she says in agreement, wondering at the echo it feels like in her mind. They sit in deep thought as a near-frown, remembering and bittersweet, falls over her. "I remember so much love. We must have all loved each other so dearly, I know that. But that's just about all I know."

"...Maybe that's enough," Ben says after a moment, planting a kiss on her temple. "If we can remember that much, we can remember for all of them. It's enough."

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She remembers this one time, when Kay brought them along to a party and in the course of introducing them to somebody she turned to Beverly saying, "Now, I can never remember if you told me the whole story, of how you and Ben met."

"We went to the same school back when we were kids," Ben offered, turning an uncertain expression into his wine cup. "We ran into each other in our hometown again, you remember."

"Right, I know what Bev was doing there. But you weren't living there anymore either." Kay looked like she couldn't figure out why she had never thought to ask this before. "What *were* you doing back in Derry at the time?"

Ben hesitated, his expression a little searching and unsettled. But finally he gave a little half-smile, said, "Just waiting around for her to find me, I guess."

The other partygoers accepting this with a laugh, his hand reaching over to take hers under the table, the two of them accepting it themselves: All she can remember now is plain and simple

permanence.